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ABSTRACT

Described are characteristics of the school improvement planning and implementation efforts made in the 47 New York State schools that were identified as low-performing in 1985. This report identifies the aspects of the school improvement process which were completed, and offers recommendations concerning appropriate actions for all schools. Data were obtained in interviews that focused on the beginning of the planning, available resources, implementation, roles, and responsibilities. Respondents were school administrators, members of the school improvement team, and school staff. Findings are discussed in terms of uses of resources, planning procedures, and related considerations, such as curriculum, staff development, and problems faced by the school improvement team. Also provided is information about respondents' views of their outstanding accomplishments in improving their schools and their recommendations for future planning. Additional research questions generated by the interview are listed, and additional needs of districts involved in planning work are specified. (RH)

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Investigation of the School Improvement Process Operating in Selected Buildings

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A school improvement process is operating in more than 1500 schools in New York State. The faculty and staff of these buildings are engaged in collaborative planning and decision-making which is having a positive impact on morale, as well as, student achievement. This article will address the characteristics of the planning and implementation process functioning in these building and what other districts may learn from these experiences.

INTRODUCTION:

A formal school improvement process began in 1978 in New York State. During this ten year time span, the process operating in a large number of buildings indicates increased student achievement and positive staff response (Report to Board of Regents, 1984). The Report to the Regents documented improvement in student achievement in reading and mathematics on a larger scale than other programs. With a sample of 45,000 students per grade (3 and 6) and almost as many at the secondary level, 180 low-performing schools moved from having fewer students above the statewide average. Not only did they move from below the Statewide average to surpass it, they maintained their growth over a two year period.

In 1985, a second group of buildings were identified as low-performing using state-wide test data. These buildings were

required to prepare an annual Comprehensive Schedule Improvement Plan (CSIP) with the assistance of the State Education Department and the Effective Schools Consortia Network. This report documents what aspects of the school improvement process were completed by the identified building and what recommendations are appropriate for all schools after a review of the planning process over three years.

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with the staff of the 47 buildings identified in 1985 through the Comprehensive Assessment Report (CAR). These buildings completed a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) with the assistance of State Education Department personnel. The interviews were conducted during April and May, 1988.

The interview assessment guide addressed issues related to beginning the planning process, available resources, implementation, roles and responsibilities. The building administration responded to the interview questions first, followed by members of the School Improvement Team, and finally, by building staff. Responses were combined to reflect a single building viewpoint. Selected questions could be answered objectively (yes/no) or numerically (10%, 50%, etc.) while others were open ended (describe the major problems you faced). Therefore, analysis of available data will provide both objective statements and subjective comments from those interviewed.

A total of 47 upstate schools were identified as "being in need of assistance" based on student achievement results contained in Comprehensive Assessment Report (CAR) data. Forty-three of these schools completed this school improvement review. A total of 401 school personnel were interviewed.

43	Building Principals
40	Planning Committee Chairpersons
147	Team Members
158	Teachers
13	Others (Paraprofessionals, PTO Members, Assistant Principals)

Data Analysis

To develop a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP), all of the responding schools used the data contained in the Comprehensive Assessment Report (CAR). Ninety-three percent of the schools also used standardized test data in the planning process. Survey data was incorporated into CSIP's in a limited number of schools. Eighty-seven percent of the schools surveyed the entire staff; the 13 percent who did not use this type of data indicated that there was not enough time to do so and still meet prescribed deadlines for completion of the CSIP. Ninety-four percent of those who did survey staff used the instrument developed by the Effective Schools Consortia Network and the

State Education Department. The remaining 6 percent used surveys developed by the district were conducted by 72 percent of the schools. Student surveys were used by 18 percent; the remaining schools indicated that they felt it was not appropriate to obtain survey data from students.

Data from each of these sources was made available to the school improvement teams. Following a systematic review of all data elements, 100 percent of the teams used the information as a basis for problem-solving and decision-making.

Uses of Resources

The success of any School Improvement effort depends on the availability of resources necessary to accomplish the objectives of the project. Resources to support the development and implementation of Comprehensive School Improvement Plans (CSIP) were made available to identified schools (i.e. staff development, released time, money etc.). All of the respondent schools used resources available to them through the State Education Department and the BOCES. Ninety percent used district resources while 80 percent availed themselves of resources from within the building.

Planning Process/Procedures

A district mission statement was developed by 60 percent of the districts; in addition, 60 percent of the buildings also prepared mission statements. In 40 percent of the districts, an attempt was made to secure a district plan and/or a district commitment to the planning process. This district plan included the following elements: Board Commitment, use of resources, staff roles and responsibilities and definition of outcomes.

A school improvement team was established in each of the buildings. Membership on the teams was 60 percent voluntary, 25 percent appointed by the administration and 15 percent elected by peers. In order to participate in the building planning process 95 percent of the School Improvement team members were provided released time with compensation.

Team leadership was established in a variety of ways. In 62 percent of the teams, leadership was appointed by the administrator. In the remaining schools, leaders were either elected by the membership or volunteered. In some schools, the leadership varied from meeting to meeting. Leadership was one of the critical element in establishing a well functioning team.

In each building, the team identified roles and responsibilities for individual team members. Fifty percent of the schools provided training in group processing skills for team

members. Seventy-five percent of the schools held team meetings during school hours while 25 percent of the teams met after school. The building administrator was with the team on a regular basis in 90 percent of the schools; 5 percent of the schools indicated that the administrator met with the team periodically and 5 percent indicated that the administrator was rarely present at team meetings. Forty percent of the schools stated that parents attended team meetings periodically. Clearly, the support of building administrators influenced the planning process. Channels of communication were developed to ensure that information was disseminated to interested parties.

Orientation sessions on the school improvement process and research were provided several different audiences. Orientation to expand the base of support with sessions were presented in buildings:

85% School Board Members
95% Superintendent/Administrators
95% Principals
90% Teachers
40% Parents

Information was provided to the Board of Education on school improvement planning activities in several ways. Eighty-six percent of the schools delivered written reports to the Board; 95 percent submitted minutes of team meetings to the Board and 81

percent prepared oral presentations for delivery to Board Members.

All school improvement teams provided an opportunity for the entire faculty to review the data it had collected and analyzed. This was accomplished through regularly scheduled faculty meetings, special meetings or through written reports distributed in each teacher's mailbox. Team members expressed their conviction that reporting regularly to the faculty and involving them in the planning process was time well spent.

Related Considerations

Curriculum: Ninety-three percent of the schools visited have a written curriculum for each instructional area; curriculum documents are made available to staff in all the schools, 20 percent of the schools indicated that the curriculum is evaluated and that there is a link between the written and taught curriculum through the performance evaluation of staff. However, 75 percent indicated that there is a link between the taught and tested curriculum through analysis of student outcomes and test item analysis. Student achievement is monitored in each of the schools; 82 percent use standardized test data to determine individual student instructional priorities while 90 percent use this data to determine group needs.

Staff Development: In 70 percent of the surveyed schools, the district/building staff development policy provides for support to the new teacher; 30 percent of the schools addressed staff needs with respect to school improvement; 35 percent provided staff development opportunities based on performance observations. Sixty percent of the schools offered 4-6 days of staff development; 30 percent offered 6+ days while 10 percent scheduled 1-3 days of staff development time.

Problems Faced By the CSIP Team:

The major problems cited by the school improvement team:

1) communication with faculty and central office
2) time to plan
3) direction from central office and
4) working with data

Interviewers Comments/Observations

A. What is the outstanding accomplishment of this building through the CSIP process?

The responses to this question can be categorized as follows:

TEACHERS: Teachers have a say in defining problems and solutions; they are being taken seriously in decision-making. There is decreasing isolation of staff. Open communication is a strength--a means to resolve difficult issues. Teachers are refining their plan and finding unity in purpose. There is staff pride in the school even through they were CAR identified.

STUDENTS: Student self-esteem is increasing. School climate has improved.

PARENTS: Parent pride in the school has increased.

RESOURCES: There are increased resources in the building. Teacher assistants at Kindergarten and Grade 1 enhance instruction. Full day Kindergarten with its developmental program is seen as a real strength. Late buses for students needing extra work are an asset; this has also increased extra-curricular programs and school pride.

PLANNING PROCESS: The staff is looking at all components of student achievement, not just PEP scores. The building curriculum is a base for a

strong, integrated program. Common planning time (e.g. 3 hours per week for planning team members) has facilitated the planning process. The plan targets real concerns.

In addition to these specific comments, subjective assessment of improvements in the following areas were noted by the following percentage of buildings:

47% improved achievement
13% decrease in dropouts
49% improved climate
43% improved morale
34% improved discipline
32% parental involvement
36% clear academic goals
43% monitoring of student progress
47% collaborative planning
47% instructional leadership
36% teacher effectiveness
6% student attendance

B. What would you recommend for this building in future planning efforts?

. More financial assistance to assist with programs

- Increase parental involvement

- Maintain reasonable class sizes...difficulty of transient student population

- More inservice time

- Addressing effective schools characteristics/ correlates

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

The results of this interview process successfully indicated that the key elements in planning and implementation strategies were completed by all building staff. However, additional research questions were also generated:

a) Has the CSIP been adequately communicated to the entire faculty?

b) Has this process successfully altered the school's climate for learning?

c) Are building level staff sufficiently trained to serve as on-going facilitators?

d) Would the CSIP process have produced better results with clearer support from central office and Board of Education?

e) What relationship exists between the district and the building planning process?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Analysis of the interview data leads to the identification of additional needs for future planning work in districts in New York State.

1) Develop training for building/district level facilitators.

2) Structure additional on-site technical assistance time for district, BOCES and SED staff.

3) Provide assistance with collecting and analyzing of data in developing a plan (strategic planning, parent/student data)

4) Assist buildings in identifying appropriate strategies to release teachers when working on school improvement team (time, recognition and resources)

5) Develop material to address the major problems the teams faced with communication, planning time, direction and data analysis.

6) Arrange a system to communicate CSIP process to administrators via work sessions and newsletter.

7) Develop material to increase parental involvement in educational process

B. The process of change is difficult under any circumstance but especially so within the school setting. The School Improvement Process brought together faculties determined to modify their instructional programs to achieve greater student performance. The positive changes observed in the buildings selected for analysis indicate the complexity of any change process and the on-going need for additional support if this process is to reach its goals.